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ABSTRACT

To discover how teachers feel about a bonus program designed to give stipends to teachers with few absences, the author surveyed teachers in two elementary schools, one an urban school with a heterogeneous student body and the other suburban and homogeneous. By using a questionnaire, information was gathered on (1) standard demographic characteristics, such as amount of teaching experience, marital status of teachers, numbers and general performance level of students in classes, days of sick leave taken, and reasons for sick leave; and (2) the teachers' responses to the establishing of a bonus program. The research found a significant demographic difference between the two schools in the teachers' experience, marital status, number of absences taken, and reasons for taking sick days, but also found generally similar opinions on bonuses. Teachers responded to a proposed bonus program by saying whether they had ever heard of such a program (overall, 71 percent yes), if they would like to see such a program begun in their schools (83 percent yes in the urban school, 60 percent yes in the suburban school), and if the program would reduce teachers' absences (overall, 83 percent yes). Most respondents said that students would benefit most from a bonus program and that the union leadership would probably be interested in such bonuses. The paper concludes by noting possible barriers to be overcome in introducing a bonus program. (JW)

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A FIELD STUDY ON A BONUS PROGRAM TO REDUCE TEACHER ABSENTEEISM

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A FIELD STUDY ON A BONUS PROGRAM TO REDUCE
TEACHER ABSENTEEISM

Introduction and Overview

Teacher absenteeism is becoming an increasing problem in many public schools. The cost of supporting these absences is staggering both in terms of the decline in students' achievement and the financial drain on the school budget in order to hire substitute teachers. The fact that substitute teachers must be hired to replace the absence of regular teachers is of prime concern. Studies have empirically illustrated that in most cases, substitute teachers are "significantly less effective in the classroom than are the regular teachers" (Manlove & Elliot, May 1979).

The preceding statement should not be construed as a criticism of substitute teachers per se, but rather, as a criticism of the "substitute teacher system." Classically, substitute teachers have been at a tremendous disadvantage when entering a classroom for a few days. In most cases, the regular teacher has left the substitute teacher with instructions to distribute the mimeographed work sheets. Such work sheets may have little, if any, instructional value. Added to the above, is the fact that the substitute teachers simply do not have enough time to get to know the students on an individual level (and vice versa). This in turn, may prevent the substitute teacher from being able to help the individual student at his or her own level of learning.

There are two ideal courses of action that a school system could take to overcome these problems associated with teacher absenteeism. One course of action would be to restructure completely the educational program at the schools. Such a change would entail the development of a completely individualized educational program. An example of such a program would be one that encompasses a large percentage of self-paced learning activities. In this approach, the instructors would serve as resource teachers by helping those students who are having problems mastering one or more tasks of a given lesson. Thus, the absence of regular teachers would not dramatically affect the day-to-day educational routine of the school. Substitute teachers could be utilized in "real instructional activities" like the regular teachers. In this respect, the substitute teachers could provide help only to those students who need help, while the other students could continue with their prescribed lessons.

The concept of providing a completely individualized instructional program for the students in our schools is very attractive and could help offset the problems currently associated with teacher absences. The probability, however, of such a change taking place in our schools on a large scale in the near future is not high. Such changes are unlikely because of a number of factors, including a lack of funding adequate to make the transformation, and resistance to change on the part of parents and teachers.

The other course of action that a school system could take to reduce the problems associated with teacher absences is to reward teachers with low absentee rates. Donald Manlove and Peggy Elliot (1979) recommend that school systems develop a pay incentive program to encourage teachers to reduce their annual absences. In essence, this incentive program might help change teacher attitudes on absenteeism. Adoption of such an incentive program would (1) eventually provide the students with the benefit of an increase in instructional activities, and (2) provide the school system with a substantial savings as a result of having to allocate fewer funds for payment of substitute teachers. The latter would be true despite payment of an incentive, a cash bonus, to the regular teachers. Ideally, a portion of the savings would go to the payment of the bonus. The remainder could then be returned to the school system's general fund. In turn, these surplus funds could be used to hire additional teachers purchase additional instructional equipment, or even provide additional financial benefits to the regular teachers. This reallocation of funds would be done in the interest of providing a better education for the students.

Houston's Second Mile Plan

A search of the literature has indicated that very few school systems have attempted to implement any type of bonus program as described above. The Houston Independent School District, however, is one district that has taken the lead in providing such a program. The bonus program for teachers with low absentee rates is actually

one of six elements incorporated in Houston's "Second Mile Plan" (Houston, 1981). The Second Mile Plan is an innovative plan that attempts to improve the quality of instruction, stabilize the staff of the Houston schools, cope with the shortage of teachers, and recognize teaching as a rewarding career in the Houston schools.

In relation to teacher absences, the plan has a provision for recognizing outstanding teacher attendance. Under this provision, eligible teachers could receive annual stipends that range from $500-$50 based on 0-5 days of absences. Under the plan's first year of operation (1979-80 school year), the school district's average number of teacher absences decreased by almost 14% from the previous school year. This reduction in teacher absences saved the school district $431,232 in substitute teachers' pay (Houston, 1981). In addition to the above fiscal savings, student academic achievement in the schools monitored for this program "met or exceeded the expected grade placement" (Houston, 1981).

It should be noted, however, that the stipend for teachers with outstanding attendance is only one of the six elements in the "Second Mile Plan" The combination of these six elements helped the students attain the high academic achievement. In this respect, it can be inferred that the pay incentive for teachers with outstanding attendance, and subsequent decline in teacher absences, did have a positive effect on student academic achievement

Many school districts should take note of Houston's efforts and success in reducing teacher absenteeism. Large urban school districts classically have had high numbers of teacher absences.

The Detroit Public Schools, for example, had over 120,000 teacher absence days during the 1980-81 school year. The cost for paying substitute teacher salaries for these absences was well over the budgeted amount of 6.2 million dollars [1]. These funds were desperately needed by the school district for other purposes as a result of Detroit's financial crisis brought about by the auto industry slump and Reaganomics.

Detroit's schools could have realized a substantial saving if a bonus program for teachers with outstanding attendance had been developed and implemented. In fact, according to our calculations, Detroit could save over $600,000 in one year with only a 10% decrease in the current annual teacher absentee rate. If the experience of the Houston schools is any guide, then a positive effect on student academic achievement might also result.

The Field Study

An issue that remains to be explored, however, is how do teachers feel about a bonus program designed to give stipends to teachers with outstanding attendance [2]. Specifically, do teachers favor the development and implementation of a bonus program? How much of a stipend would teachers want? How do teachers think their union leadership would feel about the program? Do teachers feel that it would encourage their colleagues to take fewer absences? And, finally, who do teachers think would really benefit from such a program?

The above questions were taken to two groups of elementary school teachers. The first group teaches in a K-5 elementary school located in the Hudson Valley Region of New York (hereafter referred to as School Number One) School Number One has a total student population of about 900, of whom 95% are white. The school has a faculty of 33 regular teachers and 17 special teachers.

The second group teaches in a K-8 school located in an urban area of eastern New Jersey (hereafter referred to as School Number Two). School Number Two has a student population of 750. Of this total, 70% of the student population are Portuguese, 20% Cuban, and 10% mostly Blacks or Italians. The school faculty is comprised of 28 regular teachers, 2 special education teachers and 10 special teachers.

These two schools were chosen for several reasons. The first reason was to obtain a sample from a school in an urban setting and a school in a suburban setting. The second reason was to obtain a sample from a school that had a heterogeneous student population and one from a school that had a homogeneous student population. In respect to these considerations, one of the objectives of the study was to determine if there was a "significant difference" of opinion on the bonus program between the teachers of the two schools.

Procedures

A five-page questionnaire on the bonus program was developed by the author and given to all of the teachers in the two schools sampled (see Appendix). The questionnaires were distributed in the morning by a faculty member of the respective school. The questionnaires were then collected in the afternoon of the same day by the same faculty member. Fifty-six percent (28) of the teachers in School Number One responded to the questionnaire, and, 77% (31) of the teachers in School Number Two responded to the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

Results of Section II will be discussed first. This section of the questionnaire asked the teachers to provide standard demographic information regarding the last full year (1980-81). In this analysis of the study results of the two schools combined will first be discussed. Significant differences between the demographic data of the two school will follow. In this approach, an inference will be presented first on the findings of the teachers as a group.

The first two questions of Section II asked the teachers about tenure status and length of time in the teaching profession. A surprising 91.2% of the respondents indicated that they had tenure. Twenty-eight percent reported that they had between 1 to 9 years teaching experience, while 71.9% had had over 10 years experience. These data indicate that the respondents have had many years of teaching experience and a corresponding high degree of job security.

The data show that the distribution of teaching experience over the range 1 to 15 years is approximately normal for this sample of respondents.

Other demographic information indicated that 86% of the respondents are Caucasian, and that almost 52% are between the ages of 31-40 years. Forty percent of the respondents hold a BA degree; 53% hold at least an MA, and a little over 6% hold at least an MA plus 30 units of credit. The study showed that 81% of the respondents are female, and that 71% of the respondents do not have children living at home.

Information was also obtained regarding the number of students that the teachers had in their classrooms, the achievement level of these students, and if the teachers felt that their teaching efforts had a positive effect on their students. In this respect, 30% of the teachers had a class size of 21-25 students. Thirty-six percent had a class size between 26 to 30 students. A majority of the teachers, 52%, indicated that their students were "average achievers," while 40% indicated that their students were "low achievers." Only 8% indicated that their students were "high achievers." One-hundred percent of the teachers felt that their teaching efforts had a "positive effect" on their students.

The findings that all teachers felt their teaching efforts had a positive effect on their students are striking. Recall that at least 40% of the same teachers indicated that their students were low achievers. Clearly this indicates that these teachers are experiencing some degree of success with their students. And, that

these teachers are convinced, beyond a doubt, that their students are experiencing some degree of educational growth as a result of the teachers' efforts---regardless of their students' level of achievement.

Another question in this section asked the teachers "if they had taken any sick days last year not so much because they were ill, but because those days were there, and that they were legally entitled to them". Interestingly enough, 29% responded "yes" to this question

For the most part, there were no significant differences between the responses to the questions by the two groups surveyed. In fact, there was only a significant difference between the two groups on four of the fifteen questions in Section II [3]. The first such asked the teachers to indicate the number of years of experience they had as teachers. The responses to this question indicated that the majority of teachers at School Number One are much more experienced than the teachers at School Number Two. No teacher at School Number One had less than seven years experience. Twenty-seven percent of the teachers at School Number One indicated that they had 20 years or more experience teaching as compared to only 10% of the teachers at School Number Two. Sixteen percent of the teachers at School Number Two indicated that they had between one to six years teaching experience.

There was a significant difference between the responses of the two groups in the number of personal illness days taken during the 1980-81 academic year. Table 1 shows that 29% of the teachers at

School Number Two indicated that they had taken one to four days and 52% indicated that they had taken five to ten days of absence due to personal illness In contrast, 59% of the teachers at School Number One indicated that they had taken one to four days and only 22% indicated that they had taken five to ten days of absences

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Insert Table 1 About Here

A significant difference between the marital status of the two groups of respondents was also found. In this case, 70% of the teachers at School Number One were married, and 19% of the teachers were single. Thirty-nine percent of the teachers at School Number Two were married, while 52% were single.

Finally, there was a significant difference between the two groups on the question that asked the teachers if "they had taken any sick days last year not so much because they were ill, but because those days were there and they were legally entitled to them". Table 2 shows that 96% of the teachers at School Number One indicated "no" to this question, while 52% of the teachers at School Number Two indicated "yes".

Insert Table 2 About Here

A further analysis of the demographic data could not uncover any compelling reasons for the difference in responses between the two groups on the above question. Pure speculation could point to the difference of student ethnic composition between the two schools The students at School Number One are white. The students at School Number Two are 70% Portuguese, 20% Cuban, and 10% mostly Blacks or Italians. Thus, this heterogeneous group of students at School Number Two may "fatigue" the teachers more, for a variety of reasons, than do the students at School Number One. In turn, the teachers at School Number Two may take some of their personal illness days not because they are "ill" but simply to rest.

Now that the demographic data of the survey have been adequately covered, we can turn our attention to Section I of the study which deals with teachers' opinions on the bonus program. Once again, results for the two groups combined will first be discussed. A discussion of the significant differences between the responses of the two groups will follow.

Section I of the questionnaire began with a descriptive statement on the proposed bonus program:

> Some educators have proposed instituting an incentive system to reward teachers with low absentee rates. One suggestion would be to pay a cash bonus at the end of the school year to those teachers whose absentee rate is lower than the average teacher absentee rate for the respective school district. Teachers eligible for the cash bonus would be paid a "flat rate" for each day that his/her absences were below the district average [4]

The statement was then followed by five questions that ask for the teachers' opinions. Specifically, these questions were: 1., had they ever heard of the proposed bonus program?; 2., would they like to see their district develop such a program?; 3., did they feel that the program would encourage their colleagues to take fewer absences?; 4., who did they feel would benefit most from the program?; and, 5., did they think that their local union leadership would be interested in the program?

Question One (had they ever heard of the bonus program?) was presented as more of a "teaser" to help phase the teachers into the questionnaire format. Of the teachers surveyed, 71% indicated that they had heard of a similar program.

The next question, Question Two, asked the teachers if they would like to see their districts participate in a bonus program. If they responded "yes" to this question they were asked to indicate a preferred flat rate dollar amount to be awarded for each day below the district's average absentee rate (a choice of $10 increments between $10 to $40). On this question, over 73% indicated "yes", that they would like to see their district develop a bonus program. Twenty-Seven percent of the 73% would want $40 for the flat rate, while 21% would want only $20 (Table 3).

Insert Table 3 About Here

Question Three asked the teachers if they felt that the bonus program would encourage teachers to take fewer absences. Table 4 shows that a surprising 83% indicated "yes" to this question. It is assumed these teachers feel that their colleagues are taking personal illness days regardless of their health. This may suggest that the majority of the teachers feel that their colleagues actually take more absences from work than necessary and that their colleagues could in fact, reduce their annual absentee rate.

Insert Table 4 About Here

The teachers were asked in Question Four who they felt would benefit most from the bonus program. In this question, the teachers were given the opportunity to specify either students, teachers, administrators, the school board, or society. Over 69% of the teachers indicated that the students would benefit most. Only 14% indicated that the teachers would benefit most (Table 5).

Insert Table 5 About Here

The responses tabulated in Table 5 illustrate several interesting things. First, only three teachers indicated that the bonus program would benefit society. It may be that these three teachers are looking further ahead to how well schools educate our children or, that only three teachers interpret the education of our

students in terms of long-term social benefits. Another interesting fact is the percentage of teachers who feel the bonus system would benefit students more. Perhaps this is an admission on the teachers' part that they agree with the studies that demonstrate that substitute teachers are less effective than are the regular teachers.

The last question, Question Five, asked the teachers if they felt that their local union leadership would be interested in the bonus program. Of those surveyed, 72% indicated "yes" to this question, while 28% indicated "no".

It is interesting to note that 59% of those who answered "yes" to Question Two ("would the individual teacher be interested in having the school district develop and implement a bonus program?") answered "yes" to the last question ("would the local union leadership be interested in the bonus program?"). While 25% of the teachers responded "yes" to Question One ("would the individual teacher be interested in the bonus system?") and then responded "no" to Question Two ("would the local union leadership be interested in the bonus program?"). These responses seem to indicate that there is a discrepancy between what the teachers are interested in and what they believe the local union leadership would interested in.

A significant difference between the teacher responses of the two groups sampled was evident in Question Two (did the individual teacher favor the bonus program). There was also a significant difference between the two groups on how much the flat rate should be (Table 6).

Insert Table 6 About Here

An analysis of the opinions on the bonus program data (Section I) could not find any apparent reason for these differences of opinion. In referring back to the demographic data (Section II), however, there are some very interesting differences of opinion on the bonus program of the sub groups of the two groups combined. There is, for example, an inverse relationship between those teachers who favor the bonus program and the academic degree held. The majority of the teachers with BA's, 75%, favor the bonus program. This relationship changes somewhat as the degree level held by the teachers increases. In the case of the teachers in the "MA's plus 30 units" category, only 60% favor the bonus program.

The final significant difference of opinion between the groups has to do with the age category of the respondents. Specifically, the largest age category, 31 years old to 40 years old, overwhelmingly favor the bonus program. Of this group, a total of 67% feel that the bonus program is a good idea, while only 26% of the teachers in the age category 51 years old to 60 years old favor the bonus program.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Teacher absenteeism is a problem in many schools. But the real gravity of this problem is not realized until one takes a detailed look at two important variables. The first such variable is the budget of the school district. In this respect, the cost of supporting teacher absences is robbing the district of thousands of dollars. It was pointed out, for example, that the Detroit Public Schools spent over $6.2 million for substitute teachers during the 1980-81 school year. It was also pointed out that Detroit could save over $600,000 annually if the district were to implement a bonus program that rewards teachers for good attendance.

The other variable associated with the problem of teacher absenteeism is the adverse effect on student achievement. The actual negative impact on student achievement as the result of teacher absenteeism is, of course, difficult to separate from all the other variables that affect student achievement. The success of the Houston program, however, illustrates that rewarding teachers who have good attendance rates will help reduce teacher absenteeism. Potentially, this circumstance could contribute to improved student achievement.

Although the actual sample of this study was relatively small (n=59), the high rate of teacher approval of the proposed bonus program, 73%, illustrates that the idea warrants further study. The results of this study also indicated that younger teachers with lower academic degrees are more interested in the bonus program than

are the older teachers with the higher academic degrees. Of course the reason for this difference of opinion between the two age/degree groups is apparent when one looks at the teacher pay scales for most school districts. In this respect, the younger teachers no doubt see the bonus program as a means of bringing home more money--as their standard of living is generally lower than that of the older teachers with the higher degrees.

Any school district that is interested in implementing a bonus program for its teachers will, of course, have first to overcome several barriers. The parents of the district's students represent one such obstacle. No doubt many of the parents will resent the fact that the district is willing to pay the teachers "extra money" for reporting to work when they are already receiving a salary for such services

Another barrier that a district would have to overcome in implementing a bonus program would be the teachers' union. To illustrate this point, the preliminary findings of this study were sent for comment to the leadership of a large urban teachers' union. In response to these findings, a union spokesman stated, "No comment--I do not think that a program of this nature would be in the best interest of the general welfare of the union".

The union response was not surprising. In fact, the union's response actually confirms some of the findings of this study. First, a large percentage of the teachers who favored the bonus program felt that the union leadership would not be as interested. Second, older teachers with the higher academic degrees were not

interested in the program. In this respect it should be pointed out that it is the older teachers with the higher degrees who "generally" have more influence and power in the union, or at least more than do the younger ones.

School district should not be discouraged from implementing a bonus program to foster high teacher attendance rates. To the contrary, the early success of Houston's "Second Mile Plan" and the results of this study should actually encourage school districts to be more "innovative" in developing bonus programs, programs that will help save money for the district, and,most of all, programs that will improve student achievement.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Information was obtained during a telephone interview with a staff member of the Personnel Office of the Detroit Public Schools on December 11, 1981.

[2] Special note. The Houston Plan for rewarding teachers with outstanding attendance is only one of six elements of the program. The present study addresses only the one aspect of rewarding teachers with outstanding attendance.

[3] The t test was significant at the .05 level.

[4] The "bonus plan" proposed in this study is just one of several bonus programs that could be adopted by a school district. This specific plan was chosen because it was "simple" to explain in the questionnaire format

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TABLE 1

Teacher responses for the number of personal illness days taken

Group		No Absences	1-4 Absences	5-10 Absences	11-15 Absences	More than 20 Absences
School #1 n=27	f	4	16	6	0	1
	%	14.8	59.3	22.2	0	3.7
School #2 n=31	f	1	9	16	3	2
	%	3.2	29.0	51.6	9.7	6.5

TABLE 2

Teacher responses for "taking illness days because they were there"

Group		Yes	No
School #1 n=27	f	1	26
	%	3.7	96.3
School #2 n=31	f	16	15
	%	51 6	48 4

TABLE 3

Teacher responses for "do you favor a bonus program?"

Group		No	Yes	$10 00	$20.00	$30.00	$40.00
School #1 & 2 n=56	f	15	41a	5	12	9	15
	%	26 8	73.2	8.9	21 4	16.1	26.8

(a) adjusted frequency

TABLE 4

Teacher responses for "would the bonus program encourage teachers to take fewer absences?"

Group		Yes	No
School #1 & 2 n=58	f	48	10
	%	82 8	17.2

TABLE 5

Teacher responses for "whom would benefit most?"

Group		Students	Teachers	Admin.	Sch. Bd.	Society
School #1 & 2 n=58	f	36	7	1	5	3
	%	69.2	13.5	1.9	9.6	5.8

TABLE 6

Teacher responses by school for "do you favor a bonus program?"

Group		No	Yes	$10.00	$20.00	$30.00	$40.00
School #1 n=27	f	15	10	4	5	3	3
	%	60	40	16	20	12	12
School #2 n=31	f	26	5	1	7	6	12
	%	83.9	16.1	3.2	22.6	19.4	38.7